



**December 8, 2020**

Graciela Sanchez  
Director  
Esperanza Peace and Justice Center  
922 San Pedro Ave  
San Antonio, TX 78212

Dear Ms. Sanchez,

The San Antonio Housing Authority (SAHA) would like to address the deterioration of dialogue with the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center that has transpired over the last 15 months. What should have been healthy, productive dialogue during community meetings during the summer of 2019 culminated into a hate-speech-driven public display to unfairly and negatively sabotage the agency’s mission to build and improve affordable housing communities for low-income residents in the near Westside.

During the community meetings to discuss the future of the Alazan Courts, the Esperanza Center staff has referred to SAHA staff as “Gestapo Nazis,” verbally attacked SAHA residents, used profanity in community meetings attended by families, and just two weeks ago, led an 80-person protest chanting, “SAHA lies, people die” and “housing holocaust,” which are both false and incendiary. No one has died and it is highly disrespectful and insensitive to the Jewish community to use such inflammatory language. The Esperanza Center led the protest along with its affiliated partners, the Party for Socialism and Liberation San Antonio, San Antonio Tenants Union, and Historic Westside Residents Association, among others.

While we empathize with the Center’s desire to preserve traditional public housing, the deliberate negative and false rhetoric has ballooned out of proportion and is no longer productive to the community dialogue necessary to collaborate in preserving affordable housing in the near Westside. The community dialogue is essential throughout the city as the affordable housing crisis continues to ravage our city and cities across America.

As a long-time resident of the Lavaca Historic District, we are certain you are familiar with the ongoing challenges between increasing affordable housing while preserving the history of our city’s historic neighborhoods.



Moreover, we are increasingly concerned with the misrepresentation the Esperanza Center's suborganization, The Historic Westside Residents Association, is having in the community dialogue and its role in the public debate. The association is headed by your sister and the majority of its members consist of your family members, while just a handful of actual SAHA residents are part of the association, despite public claims that it is predominantly made up of genuine Westside residents. It is not and is misleading.

In short, SAHA urges the Esperanza Center to embrace productive and positive community dialogue to provide the best possible solutions for SAHA residents at the Alazan Courts. Both organizations deeply care for their future, and we must work collaboratively in their best interests.

Just in October, we hosted 10 community meetings with SAHA residents and the larger San Antonio community as part of our five-year strategic plan to solicit ideas and partnerships with the community to improve the current affordable housing stock, increase the affordable housing availability in the future, improve SAHA residents access to food, utilities, water, and safe communities. While we are grateful for the Center promoting the community meetings on its social media channels, we regret that the Center did not actively participate in any of the community discussions.

Therefore, we would like to clarify much of the false information the Esperanza Center has relayed during protests and media interviews which has unfortunately frightened many SAHA residents and caused significant confusion with the larger community on what is actually happening at the Alazan Courts. We also fully understand the intricacies of housing policy can be daunting and technical, and we would like to provide clarification below.

### **Future of Public Housing at Alazan**

The Esperanza Center has claimed SAHA is replacing public housing with private, luxury housing. **This is false.** SAHA is rebuilding the 80-year old Alazan Courts to provide modern, affordable housing, including central air and heating and the latest safety upgrades, for residents. They are not private, nor will they be luxury. SAHA has provided subsidized housing at Alazan for more than 80 years, and we will continue to provide subsidized housing for another 80 years. It is our core mission and it is who we are. We are **not** a for-profit developer. We are a mission-driven, non-profit organization.

#### **BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

### Mixed-Income Housing

The Esperanza Center has claimed SAHA is replacing public housing entirely with market rate units. **This is false.** The Alazan Courts currently serve families of various income levels up to 80% of the area median income (AMI). Once the new Alazan Courts are built into a mixed-income community, units available to rent will be affordable for residents receiving housing assistance and will include others who cannot afford market rate or qualify for housing assistance. To help the families with the lowest income and to have enough funds to operate the property, new communities have to have some units with higher rental units to offset the costs. We aim to provide affordable housing for all residents, between the 30% - 80% AMI levels.

### Displacement and Gentrification

The Esperanza Center has claimed new construction would displace Alazan Courts residents and will lead to gentrification. **This is false.** We have reviewed the available options to renovate or newly build the Alazan Courts. Either way, residents will need to relocate to temporary housing, as it would be hazardous to have them remain in their units. While the new Alazan Courts are built, current residents will be provided an option to relocate to a newly-constructed apartment nearby (see “Availability of Affordable Housing” below), relocate to another SAHA community, or obtain a Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8).

Based on our most recent Alazan resident survey, 89% of residents said they are willing to relocate temporarily while 78% said they would prefer the Courts be newly constructed versus renovated. During the relocation process, should Alazan residents choose a Housing Choice Voucher, they will receive first priority above those on the existing waiting list. Also, once the new Alazan Courts are built, current Alazan residents will receive first priority to return to the new Alazan community if they wish. Residents will receive financial assistance for both relocating to a different location, and returning to the newly built Alazan should they choose to do so.

We also respect residents may not want to stay in the area, and so by expanding affordable housing options across the city, we give families the choice to choose where they prefer to live versus where they have to live to receive housing assistance.

We know it is fairly provocative to use the word gentrification but that is **not** what is happening at the Alazan Courts or near Westside. The very definition of gentrification inherently means a for-profit-driven act to bring wealthier individuals to a neighborhood. The new Alazan Courts will still house low-income SAHA residents seeking affordable housing and it will still be owned by

SAHA, a non-profit organization providing public and subsidized housing. SAHA's Community Development Initiatives Department will also continue to provide social services to residents.

Improving housing conditions and providing basic, modern amenities to low-income families is not gentrification. Moreover, the new Alazan Courts will increase the availability of new affordable housing which is in dire need in the city with thousands on a waitlist eagerly awaiting for new housing. We believe building new housing, and increasing its availability, mitigates displacement by providing new opportunities for residents to remain in the neighborhood, if they wish to do so.

### Availability of Affordable Housing

SAHA is building 318 new affordable units at three newly or soon-to-be constructed apartments near the Alazan Courts which will accept new residents before the first phase of the Alazan relocation process begins in 2022.

**The Legacy at Alazan**, located across the street from the Alazan Courts, will provide 80 new affordable housing units. **The Aspire at Tampico** and **Artisan at Ruiz**, located a few blocks away, will provide 136 and 102 new affordable housing units, respectively. All 318 new affordable units are under 80% of area median income which is the same range as the current Alazan Courts. In addition, SAHA is building more than 764 new affordable units across the Westside which are all expected to be ready before the Alazan relocation process begins. They include 312 new units at **Mira Vista**, 288 new units at **Majestic Ranch** and 164 units at **Culebra Crossing**.

**In total, SAHA is building 1,082 new affordable units in the Westside which will be ready for Alazan residents to temporarily relocate to in 2022.** Since SAHA is planning to build the new Alazan Courts in two phases (227 units in Phase One and 274 units in Phase Two), the 1,082 new affordable units will comfortably accommodate the 227 Alazan units in Phase One. In addition, Alazan residents will receive preference to move into the newly-built Phase One before the relocation in Phase Two begins.

### Preserving Alazan History

We know the historic Westside is important not only for the residents but for the whole city. It is in this spirit that SAHA believes in preserving the architecturally significant Alazan-Apache Main Office and Community Center which sits in the heart of the community. SAHA is interested in preserving this building in collaboration with a variety of community organizations to use it as a museum or other community purpose to commemorate the history of the neighborhood.

We are hopeful the above information dispels much of the misinformation that has been expressed in the last few months by the Esperanza Center and its affiliated partners. You can find more information at [saha.org/alazan](https://saha.org/alazan).

We will be continuing our community meetings in the coming weeks as we prepare for implementation of our five-year strategic plan and as we finalize preparations for the future Alazan Courts.

We look forward to the Esperanza Center's productive and positive participation to provide the best future for Alazan residents, the near Westside and indeed, all of San Antonio.

Sincerely,

**Dr. Ana Margarita "Cha" Guzman**

*Chair, Board of Commissioners*

San Antonio Housing Authority

**Mr. David Nisivoccia**

*President and CEO*

San Antonio Housing Authority

Attachments: Alazan Courts Board Presentations

Copy to SAHA: SAHA Board of Commissioners  
SAHA Executive Leadership Team

Copy to CoSA: City Councilmember Shirley Gonzales  
Mr. Juan Valdez, Office of the Mayor  
Ms. Michelle Lugalía-Hollon, Office of the Mayor  
Ms. Verónica Soto, Director, Dept. of Neighborhood and Housing

Services  
Ms. Debbie Racca-Sittre, Director, Dept. of Arts and Culture